Title

Looking the Other Way: Inscriptions, Murals, and Signs in South Indian Temples

Journal

South Asian Studies, 35(2)

ISSN

0266-6030

Author

Venkatesan, A

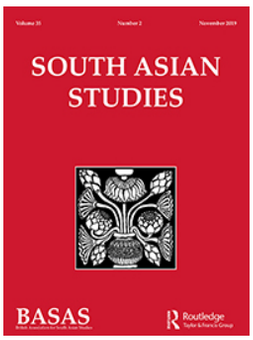
Publication Date

2019-07-03

DOI

10.1080/02666030.2019.1667641

Peer reviewed



South Asian Studies

ISSN: 0266-6030 (Print) 2153-2699 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsas20

Looking the Other Way: Inscriptions, Murals, and Signs in South Indian Temples

Archana Venkatesan

To cite this article: Archana Venkatesan (2019) Looking the Other Way: Inscriptions, Murals, and Signs in South Indian Temples, South Asian Studies, 35:2, 220-225

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2019.1667641

Published online: 24 Oct 2019.

South Asian Studies, 2019
Vol. 35, No. 2, 220–225, https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2019.1667641

Looking the Other Way: Inscriptions, Murals, and Signs in South Indian Temples

Archana Venkatesan*

Departments of Religious Studies and Comparative Literature, University of California, Davis, CA, USA

In my response to four papers on the south Indian inscriptions, I explore the tension between visibility and legibility, and the ways in which inscriptions and murals construct a devotee's experience of a sacred site.

Keywords: Inscriptions; murals; Tamil Nadu; multi-sensorial

As you flip through a richly illustrated book on the Tamil temple, you soon find amidst its glossy leaves, a photograph of a wall of cool grey granite covered in curling letters warmed by the ghee-gold sunlight of the south. You run your fingers across the script, seeking its grooves and edges, only to encounter the smoothness of the page, or perhaps you trace the curves of letters, sounding out words, trying to make meaning. In this urge towards tactility and meaning making, you would not be distant from the pilgrim who gently drags her hand across an engraved wall as part of her devotional activities, or the gaggle of schoolchildren who delights in recognizing familiar words. This is one kind of life for the south Indian inscription, guided by the sensory, where meaning emerges not from what it can tell us, but from how it might make us feel. In its other, more familiar life, inscription exists as a resource to order, catalogue, and mine for what it reveals about temples and taxes, donors and devotees. In this incarnation, it is rendered into neat, flat lines of even print, its materiality erased and its textual contents privileged, readied to tell us stories about an unfamiliar past, of long-dead kings and their accountants, of perpetual gifts that no longer exist, of forgotten feuds and uncollected taxes. In this latter framing, the inscription, although full of stories, is itself never the subject of its own narrative, never an actor in its own right.

The four papers in this volume are animated by the delicate, delicious pull between legibility and visibility, of inscriptions, murals and signs, as they exist outside temple-spaces, unbound from their physical context, and as they are known, seen, viewed and experienced when fixed in place. Although the papers offer no resolution to this enduring tension, they seek other ways to look at stone engravings, jewel-hued murals, and vinyl signage that foreground their material and physical forms. In such an approach, the value of all that adorns a temple's walls emerges not only from what it reveals about the past, how it reflects on the present, or what it may become in some unknown future, but in how it *acts* upon the devotee to structure and motivate her experience of a sacred space. Like our authors, we shadow the pilgrim, inhabiting her body, seeing with her a gaze, learning to know inscription as part of the fabric of the temple, and not apart from it. In doing so, we learn, alongside our authors, what it is to engage with the inscriptions in situ, to approach these texts not as static objects, but as dynamic, material actors, integral to constructing devotional spaces and inspiring acts of devotion. In other words, how do we move with an inscription, something that would seem to be fixed in place?[1]

If we are going to attend to the ways in which inscriptions, inhabit and animate the physical space of the temple, let us begin with the inescapable contrast of the printed versus the physical inscription, and consider it in terms of our movement in a temple. Even when we read an inscription neatly printed on a page, we attend to the movement inherent to our encounter with it. Not only are we aware of this because a published printed inscription informs us of its specific location – north wall of the mahā maṇṭapam, for instance – but also on account of the script's directionality.[2] On the printed page, we move along with the script, with happy familiarity, from left to right, seeing no disjunction between rows of Indic-script and English transcriptions, translations and paraphrases rendered in Roman. Amidst the quiet pages of a book or within the fluorescent glow of a computer screen, the movement of the inscription, and our movement with it, can only ever be unidirectional. Yes, we may move up and down a page or screen, but ultimately, the script's orientation from left to right, and our orientation towards semantic meaning, forecloses other possibilities of meaning-making.

In contrast, the south Indian temple, particularly in its expanded form, encourages ordered multi-directionality.

*Email: avenkatesan@ucdavis.edu

One may enter a temple from any number of gateways, wind past subsidiary shrines, return to a favorite shrine, before finding oneself at the heart of the temple, and then you repeat the process in reverse. One's journey within a temple is adjusted to whether one wishes to hurry or linger, whether one is a tourist come to admire the temple's architecture, or a frequent, local devotee, who has worn a familiar path through its corridors. Yet, regardless of these many possibilities, your movement in a temple, regardless of if you're entering or leaving, is always clockwise, even if you choose the shortest, straightest route into the *garbha gṛha*. Now, here is where our disjunction and discomfort emerge – not necessarily for the pilgrim, but certainly for the scholar – for it is virtually impossible to read a left to right script while also moving clockwise. Take for instance, the gorgeous, monumental inscriptions of Rajarāja Cōḻa at the Great Temple at Tanjavur, which adorn the outer walls of the temple's main shrine. The inscription, discussed in some detail by Leslie Orr, informs us of the temple's establishment and endowments, and begins at the eastern end of the temple's northern wall. On the opposite side, on the south wall, is an equally dramatic inscription, this one a panegyric (*meykkīrtti*) to Rājendra I, the son of and heir to Rājarāja. Therefore, to actually *read* either inscription, we are forced into a counter-clockwise circumambulation, but one that is not chronologically disruptive – we move from the temple's founding and the establishing endowments to the legacy of the founder's son, a natural, ordered progression. On the other hand, when we do not disrupt our movement – going *pradakṣiṇa* as we ought – even if we cannot read the inscription, the chronology is nonetheless reversed, for we begin with the son's contributions at the start of our journey, and end with the father's founding of the temple.

However, the deliberate beauty of the two sets of inscription suggests that their power and meaning derives from both what they say and record, and how they look. As we move with the monumental inscription, it unfurls like a bolt of rich brocade, its beginning and end indistinguishable, inviting sensorial immersion. Like the body of the king (or the god), they are meant to be viewed, a spectacle unto themselves; that is meaning enough. The striking, concentrated loveliness of the script, etched deep into the hard granite, turns words into embroidery, the loops and curves of the letters evoking the rich garments that adorn the bodies of gods and kings. The praise of kings and their largesse become yet another ornament for the god, a fabric of words yes, but also of script. In this way, the inscription's very physical form, its ability to inspire an aesthetic response, singles it out from other more slap-dash etchings (including at this very temple), and signals its significance, even (especially) when one cannot read it. Indeed, this is evident in Linnaeus Tripe's 1858 scroll-like photograph of Rājarāja's inscription, which could only capture its aesthetic power, absent Tripe's and others' knowledge of the grandeur of the Cōḻas and their empire.

If inscriptions like the monumental one at the Tanjavur Great Temple inspire directional discomfort, what of murals, which too, like inscriptions, are inseparable from a temple's walls and ceilings? Often located in circumambulatory passages, murals also unfold scroll-like, in the direction that the pilgrim moves, gathering their affective force through the accumulation of a series of images. Yet, the lay devotee need not (and often does not) read every image in a mural, for a single image can speak for the whole, whether the paintings depict a network of sacred places or a narrative. Such an approach would not be radically different from how Tamil bhakti poems function. Often set into cycles, individual verses from a poem are often deployed in performance and commentary to speak for the whole, be it to describe god's nature, the greatness of his places or the longing of his devotee. Similarly, poets employ myths allusively; one rarely gets a story in its full form in a verse as a simple phrase 'destroyer of three cities' or 'taker of worlds' pulls the reader-listener into a world of myth, which invokes Śiva as Tripurāntaka (destroyer of three cities) and Viṣṇu as Trivikrama (conqueror of the three worlds). Mural paintings operate in this shared, inter-textual allusive world, in which a devotee need not see a narrative fully either to comprehend it or complete it. Any one panel – Kṛṣṇa stealing butter – brings with it a host of connotations and associations that effectively completes the story for the devotional viewer. Let us take the example of Arimeya Vinnagaram, discussed by Anna Seastrand, to unpack the ways in which poetry, painting and narrative conspire to produce a multi-sensorial experience. The mural at Alvar Tirunagari depicts Viṣṇu at this site in his man-lion form, as Narasiṁha. In Tirumaṅkai's decad on the site in the *Periya Tirumoḻi* (3.1), the poet invokes several of Viṣṇu's legendary deeds – Narasiṁha is but one – not only to provide a genealogy of greatness for the god, but also to locate such an awesome figure in the intimate geography of the Tamil country. In verse 3.1.4 in which the Narasiṁha myth is recounted, we are offered the story's basic contours as well as elements that are iconographically salient – Viṣṇu in his hybrid leonine form disemboweling the demon, but also offering grace to Prahlāda, who is unnamed in Tirumaṅkai's song. While the Arimeya Vinnagaram panel is not mimetic for it does not depict the actual temple image of a dancing Kṛṣṇa, it firmly places us at that site with delightful wordplay. In Tamil, the word *ari* means lion and because Tamil does not accommodate an initial 'h'

sound, is also Hari, which is one of Viṣṇu's names. The āḻvār poets, among whom we count Tirumaṅkai, wonderfully exploit the dual meaning of *ari*, using it simultaneously to evoke both the god's name (Hari) and his character (majestic as a lion). Tirumaṅkai's verse (*Periya Tirumḻi* 3.1.4) opens with a description of Viṣṇu in the form of a lion, *ariyiṉ uruvam* (Narasiṁha), and ends by saying that this is the place where Hari abides (*vāḻum iṭam*): Arimeya Vinnagaram is where Ari dwells lion-like and *as* a lion. As in the verse, the panel simultaneously conjures the site's name, myth, poet and poem, while also making a theological point. A transcendent god is accessible, seeable, moveable and infinitely replicable. He is in Arimeya Vinnagaram, itself one among eleven temples, as he is at every other site that paint the walls of the *pradakṣiṇa* corridor.

As we have seen with this brief example, by their very form, our viewing/seeing of murals inspires Indic modes of inter-textual radial reading – for example, where one image can stand for the whole, one verse can stand for an entire poem; the Arimeya Vinnagaram verse/mural is our case in point. Mural-viewing corrects for a number of different ways of moving and seeing, smoothing out the natural disjunction we experience between wanting to *read* an inscription and our desire just to *see* it. It allows for the pilgrim who hurries along, and spares the richly painted images a glance, placing them in a general category of ornamentation, of a piece with monolithic sculptures, minutely carved pillars, and yes, the walls of inscriptions, all of which beautify the home of god. It also allows for the pilgrim who knows sites and stories, and might seek specific details to confirm these impressions, who will recognize the poetry of Tirumaṅkai in the painting of a site, whose appreciation is multi-medial and multi-sensorial. Equally, it allows for the devotee who might have a favored temple, a cherished story, or a beloved iconic representation, and lingers before it, her movement arrested, as all other images recede into the shadows, and a single panel comes to stand for the whole, where all meaning resides in her apprehension and experience of it.

While the panels in a mural are distinctive and differentiated, this is not the case for a wall of inscriptional script, which most often fades into sameness for the lay devotee. It is glimpsed in parts, situated at the periphery of the gaze, but nonetheless, as with the murals, produces a cumulative effect. This is perhaps most obvious in Ahobila, where the site is dispersed across eleven shrines, with its two focal points split into Upper and Lower Ahobila. Ahobila claims (like Arimeya Vinnagaram) to be the very spot of Narasiṁha's manifestation and his subsequent brutal execution of the troublesome demon, Hiraṇyakaśipu. Unlike the lush gardens of Arimeya Vinnagaram, Ahobila is rugged, barren and rocky, the landscape echoing the harshness of this particular deity, who has inscribed himself throughout the site, laying claim to all that once was possessed by a hubristic, misguided demon.

Even as he is everywhere in Ahobila, Narasiṁha is nonetheless anchored in two places, Lower Ahobila where we begin our vertical ascent to Upper Ahobila, where we end our journey. Lower Ahobila houses Narasiṁha in his auspicious form, with his consort beside him, beginning our climb to reach the main shrine, where a ferocious Ari awaits us, at the conclusion of our pilgrimage. Even further up the hill is a jagged rock, marking the pillar from which Viṣṇu emerged. Scattered between these two sites are free-standing inscriptions – poorly written, inaccessible and worn from the elements – clearly meant to be viewed and not to be read. These inscriptions cannot ever be seen together, but the devotee nonetheless experiences them as a whole, as constitutive of the site itself. Even attempts to read the inscriptions run into problems, as the text crosses several slabs, producing a ruptured reading. This disruption remains invisible and unencountered by pilgrims, for whom the ragged pillars represent the ruins Hiraṇyakaśipu's palace, upon which the god's utterances and commands are etched, a declaration of Narasiṁha's ownership over the place. So rather than disjunction and discomfort, the inscriptions produce for the devotee an experience utterly in keeping with expectations that are informed by specific local understandings of the site, such as Narasiṁha's marriage to a local woman, in dialogue with the pan-Sanskritic mythic narrative of his descent. Ahobila itself becomes expressive of the concept of avatāra, descent – from atop the hill where Narasiṁha emerges from the pillar, to Upper Ahobila where he guts Hiraṇyakaśipu to Lower Ahobila, where he is pacified and full of quiet grace. The site's meaning emerges in the commingling of the descent of the god and the ascent of the devotee.

As Ahobila demonstrates, movement is tied to narrative, and it is in the symbiosis of these two elements that the alchemy of experience occurs. To the historian, the inscriptions reveal something of the social and political history of the site, of its patronage under the Vijayanagara kings and its association with a key Śrīvaiṣṇava monastic institution. None of this matters to the pilgrim, who experiences the pillars of Telugu inscriptions simultaneously as the living expression of Narasiṁha and as the remnants of Hiraṇyakaśipu's palace, while the stark rock at the top of the hill is the very column from which Narasiṁha emerged all those

yugas ago. The devotee journeys the hills of Ahobila collecting various parts of the narrative, piecing them together in an imaginative performance that enlivens stone in new ways. As Sucharita Adluri points out, the illegible and opaque text of the inscriptions, become props in local story-telling and site-making efforts. The text of the inscription, which is in fact a divine command, becomes less important than how it may be employed to construct a vision of the site and guide a devotee's experience of it. Thus, while the freestanding inscriptions are the ruins of a demon's palace, the engravings carved on the walls of the shrine are apprehended as ornaments adorning the Narasiṁha's body, a god decorated in his own utterances, making himself known and felt through them, and inviting the touch of the devotee, who reverently grazes them as she circumambulates the shrine. Such intimate tactile engagement with god via the inscriptional text is only possible in the pilgrim's clockwise movement. The text on the towering inscriptional pillars that litter her ascent are largely inaccessible to her touch; here she must be content with an old Hindu substitution of the gaze with touch, a synesthetic intimacy that prepares her for *darśan* at Upper Ahobila.

Inscriptions and signage, though can fail in preparing you for a *darśan* doomed to failure, a vision that cannot occur. This is the case of the Śiva temple at Tirukalukkunram, famous for the daily visit of pious avian sages for their afternoon snack. As Leah Comeau points out, the kites (*kaḻuku*) are long gone, and the place of their feeding lies empty and bereft. Still, signs of this once miraculous daily event litter the temple complex, reminding visitors of the site as it once was and of the site that it no longer is. Here, unlike at Ahobila, where narrative constructs and affirms the devotee's experience, and even motivates their movement through it, at Holy Kite Hill, as myth has become estranged from place, that loss forces the devotee into a profound discomfort. The signage here reproduces this disjuncture, where the kites' landing spot is distant from the temple, replicating the severance of myth and site. In both of Comeau's images from Tirukalukkunram, the myth is in the foreground and the temple is a mere shadow in the background, requiring the devotee to make if not a physical leap, an imaginative one to apprehend what it once was. Like the mural paintings, the signs demand imaginative work by the devotee to construct and complete the experience of a site that is in a crucial way inaccessible. At Tirukalukkunram, you know you will not see the kites, but nonetheless, you allow yourself to be guided by the signs, to an empty place that reveals an impossible, unreachable past. In other words, the signs saturate the site with a reminder of absence.

If Tirukalukkunram is about absence and the estrangement of myth from site, the Ekāmpareśvara temple in Kanchi, drenches us in modern signage that makes the link between story and place inviolable. As in Ahobila, myth and sign work in concert not just to structure, but to assert a very specific understanding and experience of a place. Where in Ahobila, the inscriptions invite polyvalence (palace ruins, divine commands, endowment records), the signage at Ekāmpareśvarar temple is explicit and single-pointed. This temple consists of two distinct spaces that work in concert – the main shrine, which houses the Earth-Liṅga, and the temple's mango-tree, a living remnant of the site's legendary history. Throughout the temple, signs depict the site-myth of Pārvatī clutching the sand-made Śiva-Liṅga under a mango tree. In the image that accompanies Leah Comeau's article, the myth is framed as though it is a performance being staged – the curtains are literally drawn back to reveal the underpinnings of god's mysterious workings, and the *true* reason for the temple's sacrality. In this painting, looming in the foreground is a disproportionately large mango tree under which an equally large Kāmākṣī clutches a huge, dark Śiva-Liṅga, while the temple itself, like in Tirukalukkunram, rises in the far distance. A river flows below, the Vegavatī according to myth, but in this painting, it is the Gaṅgā, emerging straight from the matted locks of Śiva, high in the Himalayas. The painted myth – a mural panel for a new time and new audience – proclaims the primacy of myth and asserts the sacrality of *this* place – Kanchipuram – which has become contiguous with Śiva's snowy abode. The signs make clear that the temple derives its power from the myth, specifically the tree at its center; the temple and by extension, Śiva are subordinated to narrative.

The Mango-Tree paintings, replicated across the Ekāmpareśvarar temple, encompass every mythic element constitutive of its sacrality – the god, the goddess and the tree, which are spread across the temple. As with the mural paintings and Ahobila, the effect of the repeated sign is cumulative and urgent, but it pulls the devotee in two directions, to the temple's twin centers of gravity – the shrine of the god and the shrine of the mango-tree. Further, as the Ekāmpareśvarar temple does not have a separate shrine to the goddess, the mango tree becomes homologous of her presence, while also directing the devotee well *beyond* the temple compound, to the Kāmākṣī Temple, where the goddess abides, but without Śiva, her consort. For the devotee to experience the fullness of the myth, she must reconstitute it through movement, to gather both parts of the narrative to make the whole, but in reverse chronological order. While movement orders experience, the experience of movement is itself temporally disordered

and disruptive. One first sees the Liṅga of Earth, untethered from the goddess' embrace, uprooted from its presence under the tree, but as an enduring sign of the power of her austerities and the auspicious ending that it ushered. Yet, the goddess herself is physically absent, despite what the innumerable signs have promised us. To see her, we must retrace our steps to the mango tree, itself a sign of the site's primordial, origin moment; or we must leave the Ekampareśvarar Temple, travel some distance to the temple with no mango tree and no Śiva, but a fully present goddess embodied as the meditating, wish-fulfilling Kāmākṣī.

In each of our papers, an encounter with inscriptions, murals, signage requires and inspires a devotee's corporeal and imaginative engagement. In her journey through the temple, she is in conversation with the temple's spaces – its walls, its pillars, its hills, its trees – whether publically performed or privately contemplated of all that ornaments a temple's walls. If such thinking is too esoteric, Anna Seastrand and Leslie Orr, provide us with something more concrete – suggesting now-lost oral and performative components to peoples' relationship with inscriptions and murals. Perhaps, early modern storytellers and musicians lead pilgrims past the paintings, singing the āḻvār verses from the *Divya Prabandham* to provide that multi-sensorial temple experience. One can well imagine a festival scenario in which a cantor sung the Tirumaṅkai verses on Arimeya Vinnagaram that describe a site redolent with flowers of every kind, pointing to the artist's careful depiction of the same, while the deity at Alvar Tirunagari awaited them, covered in flowers and glittering with jewels. Here too, words ornament and manifest deity, site and authority.

While we can only speculate about how murals interacted with oral performance, we do not have to wonder about the orality of inscriptions for they themselves tell us, in wonderful detail. The Tirubhuvanai inscriptions in Orr's paper offer up a biography of their existence, tracing their life from oral command to written order, evoking their status as a symbol of authority and finality. Inscriptions from Tanjavur, Tiruvidaimaradur and Tirumeyyam speak with remarkable self-awareness to their audience, providing instructions for their copying and completion. In doing this, they direct their imaginary audience through the temple space – go to the south wall to find the rest of the inscription; you must make a copy of this very inscription in the Viṣṇu temple next door. For every instance of such performances of authority, we have a staggering number of examples where the inscription's authority is subverted or ignored. At Tiruvidaimarudur, the command to copy an inscription is never fulfilled, while at Tirumeyyam, an older Pallava inscription is simply overwritten with a fresh one. In both cases, the simple presence of the inscription was insufficient to ensure its continuing authority. With its donors, authors and engravers long gone, it could make no claims to authority and it had no story of its own to tell, except one of erasure, and as a signal of lost relevance.

Like the repeated signs of the Ekāmpareśvarar temple, which overwhelm the visitor with their insistence and ubiquity, inscriptions recede into sameness in the perception of the pilgrim or tourist-visitor, who rarely pauses to read or make sense of them. Instead, they are taken in whole, as visible, tangible indices of authority and antiquity. At the Hill of Kites, signs actively reach back to the historic past to reconstruct a site that no longer exists, while at the Ekāmpareśvarar Temple and at Ahobila, inscriptions and signs recreate the mythic past as a constitutive element of the devotee's experience. Murals with their multiple panels, registers and characters, create spaces within space, and invite the devotee to see the many in the one and the one in the multitudes.

As all the papers make clear, inscriptions, murals, signs are always aware of their dual function as objects to be viewed and texts to be read. While scholars look to inscriptions to tell us about the past, the texts of the inscriptions themselves are more concerned about the present (ensuring that an order is fulfilled) and invested in the future (that endowments are perpetually continued). When we bemoan the loss of inscriptions to the renovation ardor of pious devotees, we invoke the curious paradox of the ephemerality of something etched in stone. What bothers our modern sensibilities seemed to little concern to our medieval and early modern scribes, who have taken from granted that inscriptions, like temple complexes, would be renewed, erased, overwritten and redone. In this, inscriptions are no different from murals, which are by the form of their material existence, ephemeral. Paint flakes, chips and fades, subject to time, neglect and the gentle tactile devotion of the prayerful. Water does its own, slow soft damage, while the hard hands of pilgrims, children, lovers, etch graffiti on the ruined painted bodies of gods – inscriptions of a different kind, but potent nonetheless in making their presence felt. The authors continually remind us that even when inscriptions are gone, when a place is no longer what it once was, when new painting overlays old ones, all that ornaments a temple's walls, remains dynamic and ever-renewing, its meaning emerging not only from what it says, but what it does.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1. Leslie Orr and Sucharita Adluri provide examples of inscriptions that have been moved or removed from their original locations. In the case of Tiruvid aimaradur (Orr), inscriptions removed during a renovation were meant to be displayed in a kind of epigraphy museum. In Ahobila (Adluri), the free-standing inscriptions may have been relocated.
2. We see several examples of such locative language in these papers, particularly in Leslie Orr's examination of a series of inscriptions from four temples in present-day Tamil Nadu.